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# Putin: populist, anti-populist, or pseudo-populist?<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Vladimir Putin's populism is much contested. There are three research questions. The first is empirical: is Putin a populist, and on what grounds? The second is methodological: can comparative measuring techniques help analyse the presence of populism? The third is theoretical: what (if anything) does the case of this 'populist icon' tell us about the populist phenomenon? Four domains of Putin's politics are analysed: Russia's support for international populists, Putin's leadership style, and his leadership 'strategy'; finally, content analysis is utilized for an in-depth look at the articulation of ideas in Putin's principal speeches from 1999 to 2023. Putin is not substantively a populist, since the state (not the people) is his central political subject and his 'populism' reinforces centralized state authority. Ideationally, he is demotic (people-centrist), but also fundamentally statist, which vitiates this people-centrism. Some populist themes are used instrumentally in foreign policy, but even here the statist impulse predominates. Methodologically, the content analysis works well at showing the limited articulation of populist themes relative to demotic ones. Theoretically, this study is fully consonant with recent movements in populist studies to provide complexity-oriented accounts which avoid reifying and over-emphasizing populism.

[Western experts] are amazed . . . by the paranormal preferences of our electorate. Confused, they have announced the invasion of populism. You could call it that, if you have no other words for it (Vladislav Surkov).<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In the so-called global rise of populism, Russian president Vladimir Putin has a starring role. For some, he is a 'Euro-Atlantic populist icon' with whom European populists enjoyed a 'love affair', at least until Russia's 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine forced a volte-face.<sup>3</sup> For many, Putin is a 'great example of a populist politician' leading the 'populist assault' against liberal democracy.<sup>4</sup>

However, in reality, Putin's populist nature is deeply contested. For all those who see his populism as self-evident, there are those for whom the reverse is equally obvious: Putin is 'decidedly non-populist (yet clearly nationalist)'; calling him populist has 'little

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comparative or conceptual clarity and force[s] . . . populism to work as shorthand for . . . nationalism . . . authoritarianism . . . machismo and so on',<sup>5</sup>

This article's driving aim is precisely to explore the contested issue of whether Putin is a populist and the implications thereof. Classifying Putin's 'populism' is not just semantics. Populism is a notorious 'weasel word' whose meaning is often 'so imprecise or badly defined, that it impedes the formulation of coherent thought on the subject to which it is applied', but one where substantiated conceptualizations can still be illuminating.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, an emergent literature on 'measuring' populism has emerged to address issues of conceptual clarification more successfully.<sup>7</sup>

The article has three specific central research questions. The first is empirical: is Putin a populist, and on what grounds? The second is methodological: can measures developed for measuring populism comparatively, in particular a human-based content analysis, be illuminating for analysing the presence of populism and its interaction with other ideologies? The third is theoretical: what (if anything) does the case of this so-called populist icon tell us about the populist phenomenon?

I proceed as follows. The first section discusses the definition of populism used, arguing for a 'complexity-oriented' approach combining ideational, discursive-performative and strategic approaches to populism. The second focusses on the literature on Putin's populism, showing that there is little academic consensus, but in general, approaches arguing that Putin is a non- or anti-populist are on stronger conceptual grounds, with the Putin-as-populist works being more prone to superficial engagement with the populism literature and misuse of the populist concept. The rest of the article analyses four domains of Putin's politics: Russia's support for international populists, Putin's leadership style, and his leadership 'strategy'; finally, it uses content analysis for an in-depth analysis of Putin's principal speeches from 1999 to 2023.

The central empirical contention is that Putin cannot be regarded as substantively a populist, since the state (not the people) is his central political subject. Populism is most evident in a (partially) populist style, which is, however, used to reinforce centralized state authority and not popular control. It is on the ideational level that Putin is the least populist. There is plenty of demoticism (people-centrism), but much emphasis on paternalistic statism which defangs this people-centrism of content. The significant exception is in foreign policy, where populist arguments are occasionally used to buttress opposition to global enemies (principally the 'Kiev junta' in Ukraine), but even here a focus on state national interests takes priority.

Methodologically, the content analysis works well at capturing the nuances of Putin's ideological position and showing the limited articulation of populist themes relative to demotic ones, indicating how the selective usage of quasi-populist discourse does not make one a populist.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the need to avoid populist 'hype', using populism in a more judicious way, and not conflating it with contiguous concepts such as nationalism or demoticism. This is fully consonant with recent movements in populist studies to provide complex and multifaceted accounts which avoid reifying populism and instead to use it as an entry point to other political questions. Focussing too much on Putin's populism is a selective reading of his politics and obscures as much as it reveals. Indeed, it is far from the most important or interesting element thereof.

## Populism: from contention to consensus?

Despite its ‘weasel word’ reputation, it is clichéd to regard populism as having no substantive meaning. Certainly, in its ‘vernacular’ (particular media) usage, the concept is ‘thrown about with abandon’.<sup>8</sup> Here it generally means irresponsibility, opportunism, or, ultimately, anything the non-populist observer dislikes.

Alongside this, there is now a broad academic consensus over the core features of populism as a politics for whom the dichotomy between a ‘good’ people and a ‘bad’ elite is central.<sup>9</sup> Within this consensus, there are three central approaches: the *ideational approach* (populism as ideology, discourse or set of ideas); the *discursive-performative approach* (populism as style, performance, or discursive logic) and *strategic approach* (populism as mode of action or organization).<sup>10</sup> There is still significant contestation between these approaches, which have different intellectual traditions and foci. In particular, the ideational approach focusses more on populism as an attribute and the discursive-performative and strategic approach on populism as praxis. Nevertheless, they have several commonalities, and research in each ‘school’ increasingly engages with and synthesizes others. One central problem with populism is not that there is not now a rich literature, but that many works still do not fully engage with it, resulting in conceptual ‘blurriness’ and erroneous conclusions.<sup>11</sup> This, as we shall see, is a particular problem with the literature on Putin.

This article’s starting point for populism is Cas Mudde’s widely used ideational definition:

a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.<sup>12</sup>

This definition has sustained criticism. In particular, some consider populism to be too ‘emaciated’ and spectral even to be a ‘thin’ ideology.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, its insistence on the homogeneity of the *populus* (and the associated emphasis on a ‘moral’ people/elite division) is perhaps inaccurate given the pluralist elements of left-wing populism’s constituent people, and thereby biases this definition towards right-wing populism.<sup>14</sup>

These are important caveats, but are overstated and do not justify jettisoning the ideational approach. Many who use this, particularly those who closely examine political actors’ rhetoric as the ideational ‘vessel’, already use ‘ideology’ in a flexible way that is significantly coterminous with the concepts of discourse or ‘frame’.<sup>15</sup> For them, ideology is ‘not . . . a detailed system of ideas based on political theory, but rather . . . a set of poorly connected ideas . . . more a set of ideas than a system’.<sup>16</sup>

A further significant reason for using this definition is that it is the ‘currently hegemonic’ minimal definition and so is particularly appropriate for comparative and replicable textual analysis.<sup>17</sup> It has a particular utility in defining the boundaries and content of populist ideas and the content analysis used in this article is derived from it (see later). Indeed, this content analysis approach has, contrary to the above criticisms, proven fully capable both of distinguishing between left- and right-wing populism and between political actors’ invocations of morally pure and pluralist peoples (while confirming that, at least at the level of party manifestos, populists’ peoples are not consistently ‘moral’ or ‘homogeneous’).<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, an increasing number of studies argue that rigid conformity to one theoretical approach to populism risks reifying and over-simplifying a fluid, multifaceted phenomenon which 'is inherently more complex than a singular definition can capture'.<sup>19</sup> Such studies argue for analysing populism in a more holistic and contextually sensitive way.<sup>20</sup> They advocate a 'complexity-oriented' approach, whereby populism 'cannot be reduced to one of its components, like a moralist ideology ... it is also a strategy, a political style, and a discursive frame'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, competing approaches are often complementary but operate on different 'rungs of the ladder of abstraction'.<sup>22</sup> At the level of rhetoric, ideational and discursive approaches may be most appropriate. When the focus is on political mobilization, the focus on style and strategy may be the most productive. This is the approach that this study will take, concentrating on four inter-related aspects of Putin's alleged populism – the international, discursive-performative, strategic and ideational. But first, we will focus on how Putin is treated in the populist literature.

### **Putin the polysemantic president**

Putin's politics have often proved difficult to conceptualize. From the outset, his public persona has deliberately projected a Sphinx-like inscrutability (deriving from his well-known past as an intelligence officer). The question of whether there is even a coherent 'Putinism' is moot.<sup>23</sup> The Putin regime is notoriously ideologically syncretic; the President seeks 'paradigmatic pluralism' to arbitrate between different ideological tendencies while consistently committing to none.<sup>24</sup> However, particularly since the so-called 'Conservative Turn' of 2012–3, the regime has become more 'ideational' around core conservative values, such as Orthodoxy, patriotism, spirituality, traditional family values and opposition to 'Western liberal' gender and LBGTQ equalities. Prior to the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war, these were generally seen as 'moderate' (albeit illiberal) conservative values, at least relative to Russia's more fundamentalist nationalists.<sup>25</sup>

Where does populism fit into this ideological amalgam? For reasons of manageability, this article will focus primarily on Putin's persona and presidency rather than the entirety of his regime. Although, given the personalism of Russian politics, these are to some degree intertwined, a fuller focus on the aspects of the regime (such as state-run media) is beyond an article's scope. Populism is certainly visibly present within Russian politics, especially in the rhetoric of (now imprisoned) opposition leader, Alexei Navalny.<sup>26</sup> It has also been a significant part of the discourse of the parliamentary (Duma) opposition parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party and the Communist Party. Since these are 'systemic opposition' parties controlled by the Kremlin, populism is systemic to the Russian regime.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, conspiratorial populist rhetoric is an intrinsic component of Russia's state media environment.<sup>28</sup> But what of Putin personally?

Here, the literature does not agree. For many in-depth studies of Putin, the concept is barely used, either in terms of his political biography or the central ideologies espoused by the regime.<sup>29</sup> A few sources do argue that Putin is decidedly non-populist (Jussi Lassila), even anti-populist (Luke March).<sup>30</sup> His central aim is to control and co-opt popular initiatives, which he regards as dangerous. Such studies note the context of post-Soviet 'patronal presidential' regimes in countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which have prioritized statist economic development

partially funded by energy revenues.<sup>31</sup> For these national elites, populism and nationalism (which have underpinned regime changes in states like Georgia and Ukraine) are seen as destabilizing, and so they attempt at times to co-opt them, at others to repress them altogether.<sup>32</sup>

Ilya Matveev also argues that calling Putin a populist is a profound conceptual mistake, since Putinism's essence is elitism and centralized control.<sup>33</sup> Pain and Fedyunin concur that populism is largely irrelevant to Putin's regime except for window-dressing purposes: 'an imitation democracy also needs imitation populism for its internal legitimation'.<sup>34</sup> Ivan Krastev further argues that similarities between Putin and politicians like Hugo Chávez are superficial and based on their shared illiberalism. However, they draw different conclusions – Chávez is a genuine populist and Putin an elitist.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Olga Oliker argues that Putinism and populism are 'mutually reinforcing phenomena with some shared components' including illiberalism and nationalism, but 'are not the same', with some fundamental differences including Putin's lack of anti-elite, populist platform.<sup>36</sup>

There are conversely relatively more accounts arguing that Putin *is* a populist, on several grounds. One is Russia's obvious support for populists abroad, allegedly united by shared antipathy to the liberal democratic order.<sup>37</sup> Second is a commonality of 'macho', sexist style between Putin and other populists like Berlusconi and Erdoğan.<sup>38</sup> Third, several authors argue for more substantive ideational content, e.g. Putin's accent on being 'close to the people', and, particularly after the Conservative Turn, a focus on Manichean discourse and 'Othering' internal and external enemies. Indeed, M. Steven Fish argues that populism (along with conservatism and personalism) is part of Putinism's central ideological triad.<sup>39</sup> Others also argue that populism is integral to the authorities' relationship to the people, be this a 'populism from above', 'official populism' or 'power populism'.<sup>40</sup>

Both the 'Putin-as-elitist' and 'Putin-as-populist' literatures do have some identifiable weaknesses, although these appear more evident in the latter. The Putin-as-elitist accounts are relatively well embedded in the populist literature, with for instance, March using the ideational approach and Lassila a more stylistic one.<sup>41</sup> However, these accounts are single or two-case studies and none seeks to measure populism systematically.<sup>42</sup> As Kirk Hawkins argues, systematically measuring populism (quantitatively or qualitatively) is exceptionally valuable in conditions where both the terminology and even the very populist actors are contested. The alternative risks cherry-picking populist terms and declaring the evidence of populism 'by fiat rather than through any kind of systematic measurement', a sure path towards concept-stretching.<sup>43</sup> He advocates a 'holistic grading approach' which codes political speeches on a three-point scale of 0 (nonpopulist), 1 (mixed), or 2 (populist). Interestingly, in a later comparative study derived from this methodology, Putin is coded as 0.025, i.e. definitively non-populist, although he is not the focus of the study and no further substantiation for the numerical value is offered.<sup>44</sup>

There are more rudimentary measurement techniques in some of the Putin-as-populist literature; however, these are not especially satisfactory. Those accounts that have more systematic measurements use either a small sample of sources or questionable criteria.<sup>45</sup> For instance, a systematic comparative analysis of Putin, Modi and Erdoğan's speeches alleges that the emphasis on the nation and the country in the

leaders' discourse is proof of 'the distinct tone of their populism and its close relation to religiously defined nationalism and national identity' (rather than simply evidence of nationalism).<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, the Putin-as-populist literature often uses somewhat loose and problematic concepts of populism.<sup>47</sup> Several sources do not define Putin's populism clearly and certainly appear to be employing ascription by fiat.<sup>48</sup> For instance, Tepe and Cherkova acknowledge that Putin's populism is debated, but in the next sentence simply *assert* that Putin is a 'populist authoritarian'.<sup>49</sup> Others use decidedly non-standard definitions such as 'resorting to a xenophobic . . . and anti-liberal nativism, and insisting on his personal connection to Russia and Russians'.<sup>50</sup> Several others employ variations of the 'vernacular' definition of populism as simplistic people-oriented solutions.<sup>51</sup> Symptomatically, despite insisting on the centrality of Putin's populism, Fish's definition thereof is fuzzy. On the one hand, it is 'scrupulously attend[ing] to the popular mood and [being] so good at measuring and manipulating it'<sup>52</sup>; on the other hand, 'populism overlaps with . . . conservatism in the form of crowd-pleasing efforts to resist . . . the advance of decadent liberalism on such issues as gay rights and women's equality'.<sup>53</sup>

Others still point out multiple ways in which Putin diverges significantly from usual understandings of populism (e.g. his emphases on demobilizing and depoliticizing, combined with legalism and institution-building, and lack of substantive anti-elitism), but proceed to conceptualize him under that umbrella anyway.<sup>54</sup>

Relatedly, there are several others who do utilize 'consensus' definitions of populism, but do so inconsistently. Generally, this involves showing that Putin(ism) fulfils some people-centric elements of populism, but providing little or very meagre evidence of anti-elitism.<sup>55</sup> For example, Olga Malinova argues that Putin has always used 'populist rhetoric to combine a demonstration of "care" about the people with implicit criticism of "others" among the political elite'.<sup>56</sup> This is no trivial omission. As noted earlier, the people/elite dichotomy is central to populism (and *implicit* criticism of *some* elite actors is insufficient). Accounts focussing on identifying populism simply with people-centrism (e.g. 'empty populism') risk stretching the concept to meaninglessness and resulting in a systematic over-identification of populism such that nearly every actor is potentially populist.<sup>57</sup> For 'if everything is potentially populist, nothing is really populist anymore'.<sup>58</sup>

All democratic (and many non-democratic) politicians invoke the people periodically. Popular sovereignty is a persistent part of the (post)communist lexicon (e.g. the [deceptive] designation of Russia's Donbas proxy entities as 'People's Republics'). Some get around the prevalence of 'empty populism' by describing it as 'populist style', but even this assumes that populism can exist without anti-elitism.<sup>59</sup> 'Empty populism' is better described as 'demoticism', a feature of contemporary mediatized politics where multiple actors demonstrate their 'closeness to the people'.<sup>60</sup> Such demoticism is necessary, but not sufficient, for populism.

Another frequent example of potential concept-stretching is where Putin's Othering, enemy-blaming or anti-Westernism are seen as populism rather than nationalism.<sup>61</sup> Although the terms are often co-articulated (as 'ethnopolitism'), the tendency to use them interchangeably is widespread.<sup>62</sup> Rather than conflating them, one should make a clear conceptual distinction between populism's people (typically focussed on a *vertical* down/up exclusion against the elite) and that of nationalism (articulated via a *horizontal* in/out exclusion against non-elite outsiders).<sup>63</sup>



In sum, Putin is a sufficiently contested case to deserve more detailed analysis using clear(er) criteria. This approach is detailed in the next section. Following the holistic approach outlined earlier, analysis will focus on the key aspects of Putin's alleged populism, in order from more obvious to more contested. It will start with Putin's support for international populists, then move to his macho 'populist' style, questions of his populist personalist strategy and then analyse in detail the (non-)presence of populist ideology, outlining the content analysis technique before doing so.

### Putin's 'populist international'?

Arguably the most obvious evidence of Putin's populism is his well-documented support for populists worldwide. This includes Putin's close bilateral relations with populist leaders like Chávez, Berlusconi, Modi and Orbán, Moscow-hosted conferences for populist forces, overt financial support (such as a €9 million Russian bank loan to the Front National in 2014), as well as the murkier covert interference in favour of 'populist' events like Brexit and Trump's 2016 election – as close Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed: 'we interfered, we are interfering and we will interfere'.<sup>64</sup> Despite the self-mythologization of this statement, there are clearly multiple synergies at work.

There is, however, significant debate over whether such links are more ideational (the aforementioned 'love affair') or more opportunistic. Clearly, there is an ideological attraction on behalf of the Kremlin's fellow-travellers (particularly right-wing ones) for Putin's 'strong leadership' and 'traditional values', especially after the Conservative Turn. Moreover, this ideological attraction might be regarded as 'populist' in terms of regarding Russia's declared counter-hegemonism (opposition to Western unipolarity) as support for global 'underdogs' against US and EU elites.<sup>65</sup>

However, it seems more accurate to regard the Kremlin's intentions as 'primarily functional', especially given the Kremlin supports parties across the political spectrum and not just ideologically contiguous right-wing nationalists.<sup>66</sup> As Anton Shekhovtsov argues, even Russia's interaction with the far right involves the ad hoc utilization of 'ideological syringes' to preserve the 'existing patrimonial regime at any cost'.<sup>67</sup> Russia's pragmatism involves 'trans-ideological' repertoires of different discourses to attract and leverage diverse groups of Russia-sympathizers.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, Russia is relatively indiscriminate about whom it supports, including mainstream non-populists (for example, Russia has close relations with both Brazilian populist ex-president Jair Bolsonaro and his non-populist successor Lula da Silva). Close relations between Russia and a country's political forces are often based on historical friendships, particularly in the global south, and are barely dependent on Putin personally.

Focus on the alleged love-in between populists and Putin also ignores how contentious support for Russia has been among populist 'fellow-travellers': 'right-wing populists in Scandinavia and Central and Eastern Europe can be even more hawkish on Russia than mainstream parties'.<sup>69</sup> More pro-Russia parties (especially in France, Italy and Austria) have 'read the room' and dropped their erstwhile support in 2022.<sup>70</sup> More fundamentally, Russia does not *create* populist forces, whose origins are in their respective societies. Their exploitation might be seen as part of a larger effort to subvert Western democracies by supporting illiberal actors. However, the ad hoc nature of such support indicates that it might be better understood as an attempt

to find allies wherever they can be found based around some common policy positions (e.g. opposition to liberal interventionism in the case of people like Pat Buchanan and Peter Hitchens; anti-NATO views in the case of the radical left and some paleoconservative and postliberal stances in the case of right-wing allies). As such, the focus on populism is at best a partial truth, at worst a misleading inaccuracy.

### Putin the bad-boy populist?

Discursive-performative approaches to populism include those focusing on a leadership style which ‘flaunts the low’ values of the people against the ‘high’ elite.<sup>71</sup> Above all, this manifests itself in an iconoclastic leadership style exhibiting ‘bad manners’ and performing crisis, breakdown and threat.<sup>72</sup> Male populist leaders in particular are prone to emotive, shocking and sexist discourse. Thus, such leaders show both their ostensible authenticity as people with the mores of the ‘common folk’ and their anti-elitism in their disdain for mainstream political convention.

*Prima facie*, Putin is an obvious example of such ‘bad boy’ leadership. Many will be familiar with images of him bare-chested astride a horse, or with his quasi-superhuman exploits flying fighter jets or swimming for ancient amphorae.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, his rhetoric has been replete with aggressive macho rhetoric, such as his famous exhortation to ‘waste [terrorists] in the sh\*thouse’ or his rape ‘jokes’ to foreign leaders.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, his official biography outlines his humble origins, with this ordinariness being reinforced by his outsider’s thug-like ‘populist language’.<sup>75</sup> For some, this is enough evidence of Putin’s heteronormative populist style that is clearly reminiscent of other (especially right-wing) national-populist leaders like Trump, Erdoğan and Bolsonaro.<sup>76</sup>

However, this is a partial reading of Putin’s central ‘Father of the Nation’ role. Though strongly gendered, it cannot be reduced to iconoclastic machismo – it encapsulates multiple personae including historian, military leader and sober statesman, and perhaps above all he ‘has developed his own idealized view of himself as CEO of “Russia, Inc.”’<sup>77</sup> In these ‘statesman’ roles, he is more prone to use ‘high’ rhetoric, for example quotations from Russian historians and philosophers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Ivan Ilyin. Moreover, his rhetorical style tends to be laconic and rather aloof, rather than the archetypal ‘angry populist’. One might also ask what the ‘low’ bad manners are trying to convey beyond a popular connection. For the populist archetype, ‘taboo-breaking’ is part of the performance of crisis and the representation of an outsider-saviour who will wrest people’s power from the nefarious elite. Although the ‘saviour’ image was certainly present in Putin’s leadership of the second Chechen war (1999–2004) which forged his domestic image, this was a war against ‘terrorists’, not elites.

In other ways, Putin is far from a disruptor or outsider. He was appointed to the Presidency by Russia’s first President Boris Yeltsin, and although he often defines his politics in opposition to the ‘wild 1990s’, he has never fundamentally criticized his former boss. His biography also reinforces his adherence to traditional forms of state authority, in particular the KGB, which he allegedly tried to join as a teenager, and the Church. As such he is ‘an organization man’, ‘a product of the Soviet state and its loyal servant’.<sup>78</sup> He might prioritize concern for the people, but central to understanding Putin is that he ‘considers himself to be a great builder of a great state’.<sup>79</sup>

## Putin the charismatic personalist?

The strategic approach to populism focusses directly on how populists gain and maintain power (i.e. less on what they say and how they articulate it, and more on what they do). The main focus is on the role of a charismatic leader in mobilizing support, and in the 'classic' statement of this approach, populism is 'a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers'.<sup>80</sup>

On the face of it, Putin fits this approach squarely as a charismatic leader with patrimonial authority and inchoate links to intermediate organizations.<sup>81</sup> He is clearly personalistic, having maintained political dominance for over 20 years with stratospheric levels of electoral support. Putin leads a 'patronal presidency' whereby he is central to a system of corrupt elite power relations (*sistema*).<sup>82</sup> He is 'charismatic' in as much as he evokes devout support from his followers, be they officials like Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill who in 2012 declared Putin's rule 'a miracle of God' or pop groups who demand a 'man like Putin'. Here, the strategic approach partially overlaps with the Laclauian discursive approach: Putin as the ultimate 'empty signifier', a blank sheet representing the People against Russia's nefarious 'Others'.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, Putin relies on some ostensibly unmediated (but *de facto* state-controlled) organizations, which some have dubbed 'ersatz populist'.<sup>84</sup> Such 'pseudo-populist' initiatives include Putin's annual Direct Line TV event, wherein he answers questions from the general public and presents himself as a 'President of the people' able to address popular concerns by personal intervention without (and often against) other state authorities.<sup>85</sup> Decisions are often delegated to his umbrella electoral organization the All-Russian People's Front, which involves the 'symbolic co-optation of the opposition's populist potential'.<sup>86</sup>

However, there is much that does not accord to this definition. I agree with the strategic approach that populism is about mobilization – i.e. the people/elite antagonism is not merely rhetorical, but intended to be acted on.<sup>87</sup> However, as noted earlier, Putin did not come to power by popular mobilization but by appointment and much of his politics is about counter-mobilization and control. Buttressing his stylistic aloofness, he maintains a somewhat remote supra-political role. For instance, his inaugurations differ from genuine populists – Putin travels to an elite 'coronation' in palatial surroundings via streets completely cleared of people.<sup>88</sup> His public speeches are much less regular than populist leaders.<sup>89</sup> His public engagements are highly choreographed, with suggestions that pro-Putin demonstrations and his public meetings rely on paid activists (in 'Potemkin village' tradition).

Similarly, Putin is a politician who does not actively campaign for office, but relies on incumbency advantages, does not debate opposition politicians and famously does not use the internet. Even his 'personality cult' is rather anaemic and sustained more by informal mechanisms than by direct state intervention, contrasting with the more extravagant public support movements behind populist leaders.<sup>90</sup> Nor does Putin rely on direct mobilizational support from unorganized followers. Instead, it is *indirect*, but *organized*. For example, the presidential 'party of power' United Russia, which dominates national and regional legislatures, is a sophisticated electoral bureaucracy more reminiscent of a (weak facsimile of) the former ruling communist party than a populist movement. Putin is not even a member of it. Ersatz populist mechanisms such as the 'Public

Chamber', where society representatives meet to discuss social issues and legislation, are formed by appointment not popular input. Even Putin's public evisceration of officials, which might be regarded as evidence of anti-elite populism, is better seen as a continuation of the tradition of 'Good Tsar, Bad Boyars' which reinforces the power of the Emperor over his subjects.<sup>91</sup>

It might be objected that genuine populist leaders also try to control mobilization and rely on a partially de-mobilized people.<sup>92</sup> Certainly, but such leaders still need to appeal to electorates and attract supporters. Characteristically, Putin's rule lacks the churning mobilization against elites, opposition politicians and the constitution that have characterized the rule of, for instance, Hugo Chávez or Viktor Orbán.<sup>93</sup> Symptomatically, Putin's 2020 constitutional amendments, though put to referendum, were fundamentally de-politicized (i.e. debate focused on their *socio-economic* consequences rather than potentially controversial issues such as Putin's ability to run for two more terms).<sup>94</sup>

Putin's aversion to popular mobilization is such that some have argued that he fears his own people.<sup>95</sup> Abhorrence with popular spontaneity appears deeply embedded in Putin's psychology from watching the Berlin Wall collapsing while stationed in Dresden. The Russo-Ukrainian war showed this remoteness from his people very starkly – not just Putin's comically long meeting tables, but the insistence that the conflict was a 'Special Military Operation' not a full-scale war, which would require the dangerous uncertainties of full-scale military mobilization.

Finally, it should be noted that however much Putin's support relies on personalism, it also has a (not irrelevant) façade of rational-legal authority.<sup>96</sup> The centralized 'Super Presidency' is enshrined in the constitution and underpins much of Putin's control. To this degree, the 'empty signifier' is not Putin himself, but rather the Presidency, behind which lies the larger historical entity of the State, and the cult of statehood promoted by Soviet and Russian leaders. None of these aspects are accounted for by describing Putin as a populist leader.

## Putinism as populism?

I now turn to the ideational elements of Putin(ism). Since the ideational approach focusses more on what actors are than what they do, the need for clear measurement to avoid cherry-picking evidence of populism is arguably more crucial than for other approaches.

In order to analyse Putin's ideational 'populism', I now use a two-stage textual content analysis methodology adopted from two works by Luke March.<sup>97</sup> The first (quantitative) stage counts instances of populist themes in texts using an online codebook.<sup>98</sup> The second interprets them qualitatively. Measuring populism is an important corrective to the problem of degreeism, i.e. the assumption that all actors are more or less populist, in which case the category potentially becomes meaningless.<sup>99</sup> There are now a wide variety of methodologies for measuring populism. For example, Hawkins' aforementioned holistic grading is useful for large-n identification of populist rhetoric. Content analyses such as March's are more time-intensive and less useful for large-n studies, but allow more fine-grained and detailed analysis for small-scale projects.

March's approach has been chosen for several reasons. First, it can counter the worst examples of degreeism: it first identifies the core properties of populism (as a nominal

[dichotomous] category) and then uses a more ordinal [continuous] approach to investigate the relative strength of populism over time and space. This fulfils Sartorian prerequisites for concept formation, permitting some degreeism provided that concept formation occurs before quantification.<sup>100</sup> Secondly, and relatedly, the approach helps distinguish populism from non-populism. Thirdly, since the approach is derived from the Muddean definition of populism, it adapts one of the most widely used definitions in the literature. These elements contribute to the approach being replicable.

By way of a fuller illustration, the approach first codes ‘quasi-sentences’ (meaningful statements) in documents for the three above-mentioned core elements of the Muddean core definition: people-centrism, anti-elitism and popular sovereignty. All three elements need to be *consistently* present for an actor to qualify as populist.<sup>101</sup> When applied to the UK party system, this approach found that only the radical left and radical right satisfied this criterion. In contrast, the mainstream political parties scored strongly on people-centrism and weakly on popular sovereignty and anti-elitism. The qualitative analysis found that it was more accurate to describe them as ‘demotic’ (close to the people), not populist.<sup>102</sup>

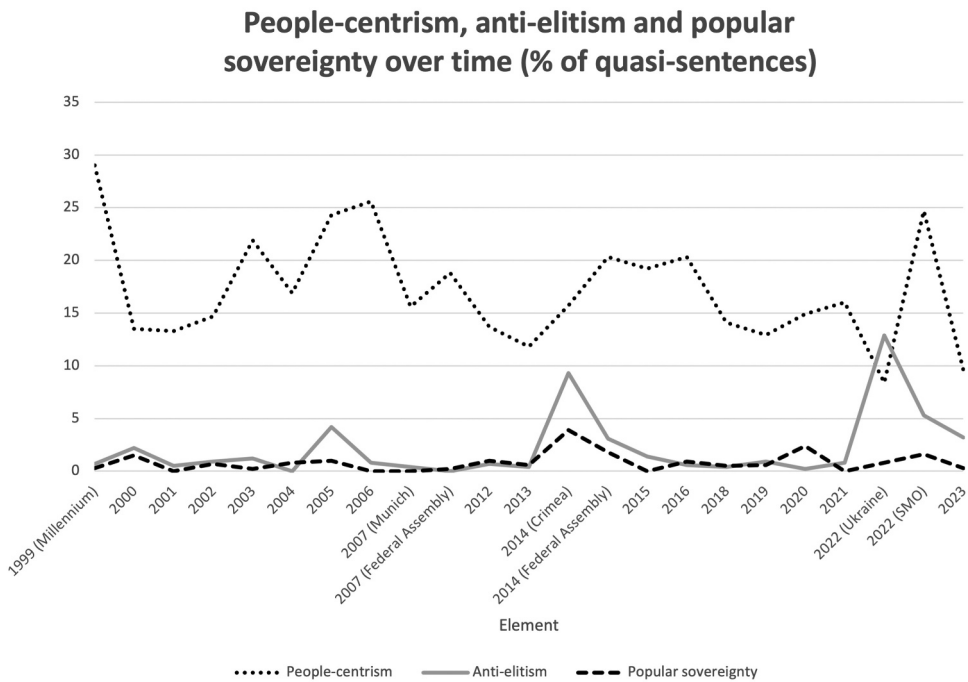
Whereas this approach has previously been confined to party manifestos, there is no *a priori* reason why it cannot be used to analyse other speech forms. That is what is done for the remainder of this section. The focus is on 23 of Putin’s key speeches over the duration of his period in office (1999–2023). These include his annual addresses to the Federal Assembly, which set out the fullest official narrative.<sup>103</sup> Other speeches coded include ‘keystone’ speeches from across his rule; his 1999 ‘Millennium Manifesto’ which articulated his strategic political agenda; his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, which marked a step-escalation of Russia’s hostility towards the West; his 2014 speech celebrating the annexation of Crimea, seen as a high point in his increasing nationalism, and two February 2022 speeches just before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine which rationalized recognizing the independence of the Donbas ‘republics’ and then starting the ‘Special Military Operation’ (SMO). Using March’s codebook, the author and another trained coder used the official Kremlin translations available from [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru), checking with the Russian translations where necessary.<sup>104</sup> Speeches were coded separately, then re-coded in case of disagreement.<sup>105</sup>

As can be seen from [Table 1](#), which totals the number of ‘populist’ quasi-sentences as a proportion of the overall number, there is scant evidence of populism overall. The speeches generally score very heavily on people-centrism, with comparatively little evidence of anti-elitism or popular sovereignty (indeed there are some speeches which score zero or close to zero on these elements). Overall, the skewing towards people-centrism shows a similar profile to March’s mainstream UK parties rather than the populist ones – i.e. it looks much more demotic than populist.

If we look at the trends ([Figure 1](#)), there is no *sustained* increase in populist traits over time. For instance, people-centrism is *less* (13.2%) in Putin’s fourth term (2018-) than his

**Table 1.** Putin’s populism scores 1999–2023.

Total quasi-sentences	People-centrism (no.)	People-centrism (%)	Anti-elitism (no.)	Anti-elitism (%)	Popular sovereignty (no.)	Popular sovereignty (%)
10006	1641	16.4	186	1.9	77	0.8



**Figure 1.** People-centrism, anti-elitism and popular sovereignty over time (% of quasi-sentences).

first (1999–2004) (17.9%). Popular sovereignty remains similarly negligible (0.8 versus 0.6%). Anti-elitism does nearly triple (3.1 versus 1.2%). However, [Figure 1](#) shows that this relates to spikes in individual speeches, especially his speeches on Crimea/Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, rather than a generalizable rise in populism. This becomes more evident when we look at each ‘populist’ element in turn.

### **People-centrism**

The very high people-centrism scores are not exactly what they seem. A lot of the invocations to a unified people are quite generic and contentless, principally the use of ‘we’ and ‘our’ (e.g. ‘our country’). This is common to populist and mainstream actors addressing a common audience (e.g. the electorate) and can indicate demoticism, not (or at least, not only) populism. The nature of many of these speeches (especially the Federal Assembly addresses) as direct interactions with the political leadership and the wider public also indicates a high degree of ‘closeness to the people’ is integral to the format.

It’s notable, too that ‘the people’ is relatively infrequently invoked by name, with alternative invocations of a collective ‘demos’ being common (e.g. citizens, society, the public, or simply ‘Russia’). Much content of the speeches is technocratic, with a focus on economic improvement and state development, and (until the late 2000s) a more (liberal) democratic emphasis on civil society and the party system. Reflecting the Conservative Turn, there is a gradually greater emphasis on conservative/nationalist themes (e.g. spirituality, culture, and references to the ‘nation’) from 2012/2013 onwards, although these are present throughout.

It is difficult to see Putin's people as genuinely populist however. There are certainly increasing emphases on the unity of the Russian people (particularly in terms of its historical role, mentality and culture). However, these people are not homogeneous, with multiple mentions of their multi-ethnic/multinational nature and pluralism.<sup>106</sup> Conversely, and more significantly, although Putin represents himself as close to the people, these people are not autonomous of state power. There is a consistent paternalist emphasis on the authorities' duty to look after people and people's patriotic duty to the state: 'Russia is characterized by a tradition of a strong state. Therefore, the main public demands are addressed to the state: to guarantee civil rights and justice.'<sup>107</sup>

Simultaneously, the institutions of state power (such as the constitution and federal authorities) are invariably viewed positively as 'institutions that are the carriers of traditional values'.<sup>108</sup> The subordinate position of the demos is sometimes made explicit – the phrase 'state and society' occurs several times, while in 2012, Putin argued that Russia was a 'civilization-state' unified around Russian national values.

Nor is there any substantive evidence of Putin as the 'empty signifier'. Indeed, the speeches are relatively impersonal and although Putin uses 'I' or 'we' regularly, there is certainly nothing remotely akin to Hugo Chávez's transubstantiationist rhetoric: 'Chávez you are no longer Chávez. You are a people. Chávez became a people.'<sup>109</sup> Instead, Putin presents himself and the presidency dispassionately as the senior state representative.

### **Anti-elitism**

Anti-elitist sentiment does appear in Putin's speeches, although it is usually very generic or partial, focussing on nebulous bureaucratism or local instances of corruption. Especially when combined with the aforementioned veneration of the central authorities, this cannot be seen as a systematic elite criticism resonant of populism, since criticism of discrete elites is a standard feature of politics.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, when political parties and civil society are (generally) seen as responsible partners of the state, this is a far cry from (for instance), Trump's demonization of his party-political opponents. Indeed, on five occasions (2000, 2003, 2007, 2016 and 2022 [Donbas recognition speech]), Putin actually warned of the risks of populism (meaning demagoguery).

There are some isolated examples of quasi-populistic anti-elite rhetoric. Occasionally Putin criticizes the Bolsheviks (and Lenin personally) for their legacies. In 2005, Putin's Federal Assembly address contained several attacks on big-business 'oligarchs' and state corruption on the eve of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's conviction on (trumped-up) charges. In 2015, Putin launched a vehement attack on the Turkish 'ruling clique' for their alleged 'collusion with terrorists' in the wake of a freeze in bilateral relations after Turkey's downing of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 M attack aircraft near the Syria – Turkey border on 24 November 2015, shortly before the speech was given

There are many more ostensibly populist elements in Putin's speeches focussing on Ukraine in 2014, and 2022–3. Putin articulated extremely vehement attacks on the Ukrainian authorities – the 'Kiev regime' or 'fascist junta' who had allegedly seized power in a Western-backed 'coup' to oppress the Ukrainian population and break their historical-linguistic ties with Russia. Such rhetoric clearly amplified state propaganda

tropes about the origins of the conflict that have been widely shared abroad (especially on social media).<sup>111</sup> Some authors take this attack on foreign elites as a major element of Putin's populism.<sup>112</sup>

However, it is problematic to see this rhetoric as truly populist, because of the absence of the people as an independent agent countering the elite. First, Putin regards social mobilization in Ukraine as the product of (Western-backed) elite machinations rather than popular revolution. Second, although 'only Ukraine's own people can put their own house in order', Putin (spuriously) states that Russians and Ukrainians 'are one people' who 'cannot live without each other'.<sup>113</sup> This delegates to the Russian state (not the Ukrainian people) the right to dictate to the Ukrainian authorities, by defending itself 'against those who have taken Ukraine hostage'.<sup>114</sup> Finally, the focus is less on Ukrainian elites *per se* than Ukraine's role as an 'anti-Russia' whereby the West is allegedly 'using Ukraine as a battering ram against Russia and as a testing range'.<sup>115</sup> All in all, neither the Russian nor (especially) the Ukrainian people have agency in this vision, which appears to be motivated far more by anti-Westernism than anti-elitism.

### **Popular sovereignty**

Reflecting the meagre quantitative popular sovereignty scores, the substantive textual references to this element are minimal. Where popular sovereignty is invoked, it usually means little more than greater public openness or responsiveness of (local) elites and governing mechanisms. As such, the coverage is similar to the rather nebulous invocations of people's power noted in mainstream UK parties.

Moreover, echoing and reinforcing the state paternalism noted earlier, there is very little focussing on the people as an *agent* of change. Indicatively, where there are explicit references to sovereignty, this is predominantly *national* or *state* sovereignty/independence, not popular sovereignty as such. The 2023 Federal Assembly address is typical in this regard.<sup>116</sup> It argues that 'the people of Russia . . . are the foundation of our national sovereignty and our source of power', then highlights the conjoined nature of 'sovereignty and our national interests'. Putin then quotes (Tsarist Prime Minister) Pyotr Stolypin on the need for Russians to unite to support 'one historical supreme right – the right of Russia to be strong.' The popular will is simultaneously invoked and subordinated to state interests.

Some take Putin's emphasis on sovereignty to be populist.<sup>117</sup> This might be regarded as a legacy of 'sovereign democracy' (popularized by former Kremlin official Vladislav Surkov). Although used only briefly in the mid-2000s, this term crystallized consistent themes in Russian official discourse. But sovereign democracy had little to do with democracy or the demos as such; it outlined the right of the state to determine its own method of political, economic and cultural development unencumbered by foreign or domestic interference. In this way, it drew on Schmittian emphases on the rationality of enlightened elites. As such, Putin's sovereignism 'does not make "the people" the source of sovereignty, but quite the reverse, confirms the autonomy and independence of the authorities as regards the population'.<sup>118</sup> This thoroughly corroborates his anti-mobilization emphasis noted earlier.



**Table 2.** Putin’s speeches: Populist and non-populist elements.

	Populist elements	Non-populist elements
<b>People-centrism</b>		
<i>Pure people</i>	<p><i>People as everyone</i> (citizens, society, we, our, us, voters, ordinary people, our country, [our/the/united] people)</p> <p><i>People as civic/cultural nation</i> (united Russian nation/people, national traditions/spirituality)</p> <p><i>People as ethnic nation</i> (Russian language, history, cultural values, civilization)</p>	<p><i>Pluralist people</i></p> <p>Pluralism, liberties, civil society, individualism</p> <p>Multiethnicity and diversity of peoples of Russia</p> <p><i>State superiority to people</i></p> <p>Civilization-state</p> <p>Social contract between people and state</p> <p>Citizen’s duties to state</p> <p><i>Fallibility of people</i></p> <p>Mistakes of the people (1999)</p> <p>Deficit of spirituality and morality (2012)</p> <p>Need to oppose populism (demagoguery)</p>
<b>Anti-elitism</b>		
<i>Political</i>	<p>Communist/Bolshevik totalitarian experiment</p> <p>Shadowy influence groups</p> <p>Narrow group interests</p>	<p>Good constitution</p> <p>Strong federalism</p> <p>Traditions of strong state</p> <p>Russia as great power</p> <p>Honesty and responsibility of state employees</p> <p>Pride in law enforcement</p> <p>Respect for intelligentsia/science/experts</p> <p>Responsible political parties</p>
<i>Economic</i>	<p>Corrupt (law) officials</p> <p>Elite enrichment/embezzlement</p> <p>Oligarchic clans</p>	<p>State development of market economy</p> <p>State/legal mechanisms to overcome corruption</p> <p>Integration into global economy</p>
<i>Foreign</i>	<p>OSCE bureaucratic apparatus</p> <p>Ukrainian authorities: neo-Nazi Russophobes/junta</p> <p>Ukrainian oligarchs/clans</p> <p>Ukrainian armed coup</p> <p>Turkish ruling clique</p> <p>US elite and ‘Empire of Lies’</p> <p>Russophobic Western governments</p>	<p>Russia as pragmatic, reliable ally</p> <p>Stable and predictable world order: non-confrontation</p> <p>‘Normal, constructive cooperation’ with EU, US (2018)</p>
<i>Intermediaries</i>	<p>Bureaucratism, red tape</p>	<p>Need for effective regulation</p> <p>Trustworthy civil service</p>
<b>Popular sovereignty</b>		
<i>Political</i>	<p>Popular will</p> <p>Freedom (political rights, freedom from fear)</p> <p>(Local) civic control of state/public services</p> <p>Direct democracy/referenda</p> <p>Crimean sovereignty</p> <p>Sovereignty of Donbas ‘People’s Republics’</p>	<p>Sovereignty/independence of state/nation (not people)</p> <p>National interests</p> <p>State’s duty of care for society</p> <p>Central aim of restoring trust in state</p> <p>Patriotism and unity</p>
<i>Economic</i>	<p>Development of people’s economic/property rights</p> <p>Health opportunities for all</p>	<p>State-led economic development</p>

Overall, where does populism sit in Putin’s ideology? Table 2 shows the definite presence of isolated ‘populist’ elements, but also multiple non-populist elements (particularly elitism and statism). When combined with the numerical paucity of populist elements in the quantitative data earlier, the evidence largely supports the Putin-as-elitist literature, albeit with some qualifications and nuances.

When the focus is on domestic politics, populist arguments have very little resonance, and Putin's appeal resembles the demotic, not populist appeal of mainstream democratic politicians, particularly since he claims to be 'close to the people' and looking out for their interests, but uses anti-elitism very selectively, either when discussing the communist heritage, or selected cases of oligarchic/bureaucratic corruption. In general, the absence of a *consistent* dichotomy between the Russian people and negative others makes Putin's people-centrism closer to 'banal democratic rhetoric' than populism.<sup>119</sup> Instead, a systematic and sustained anti-elite narrative is absent, and Putin's innate authoritarian statism is reinforced by narratives that see the Russian state as the expression of traditional national(ist) values, with contemporary political institutions (e.g. the constitution, judiciary, parliament and party system) as essentially benign and beyond reproach. When juxtaposed against the absence of substantive emphases on popular sovereignty, this indicates the constrained position of Putin's people versus the state, which is ultimately Putin's central political subject. Indeed, the majority of non-populist elements in [Table 2](#) relate to the security, stability, and sovereignty of the state, which implies that Putin's statism is fundamentally not populist.

Populist elements look *prima facie* more evident in foreign policy, although even here are very circumscribed. Anti-elitism is certainly an argument/frame to be deployed against *foreign* elites as required. However, Putin does not turn the anti-elite references into fully fledged calls for the people in these countries (even Ukraine) to overthrow their government and establish a just regime. Rather, he uses them to give context to the 'hostile' acts of these regimes towards Russia or Russian-speaking minorities.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study has shown Putin is far more anti-populist than populist. Using the main academic definitions of populism, we can see that the clearest resemblances are stylistic – a 'low' leadership image with similarities to (especially) right-wing populist leaders elsewhere. But 'populism' only partially captures Putin's more varied leadership style, which can adopt a 'higher' register and a more statesman-like image. In terms of external linkages, Putin's regime does support populists abroad, but does so among a range of 'fellow travellers' (including mainstream politicians) with a predominantly instrumental approach.

In terms of leadership strategy, Putin's resemblance to populist politicians is superficial. Unlike populist leaders who seek to co-opt and mobilize the popular will against elites even in office, Putin reinforces the centrality of the state and verbalizes the paternalistic care of the authorities for the people. In ideational terms, the content analysis showed how populist ideas have only fleeting articulation in Putin's rhetoric, and especially little resonance in domestic politics. Populism is occasionally used in foreign policy critiques, above all in the lambasting of the post-2014 Ukrainian authorities. But, the factual tendentiousness of such rhetoric (e.g. Ukrainian 'Nazis') aside, Putin appears little different from many state leaders haranguing foreign governments for activities they see as hostile to their country.

In sum, at best, the description of Putin as a populist is very partial. At worst it is misleading, because it mistakes the central ethos of Putin's politics as mobilizing and articulating the popular will, whereas its essence is defending and reinforcing *raison*

d'état. In this sense populism has some similarities to another much-overused term with respect to Russia: fascism. Few would deny that the Russian regime has fascist elements, but as a term to describe the essence of Putinism, it obscures more than it reveals.<sup>120</sup> The consistent thread in Putin's policies is conversely that he is a *statist* who sees himself as leading, even incarnating, the rebirth of the Russian state. Nevertheless, the justification for state authority has changed profoundly over time, and especially since 2012. Whereas earlier (as his presidential addresses show), it was partially based on state promotion of technocratic government, the market economy and civil society, it has become increasingly conservative and illiberal to the degree that Putin's ideology openly advocates for authoritarian rule and an anti-Western foreign policy.

Ultimately, does it matter whether Putin is a populist or not? Perhaps someone who supports (some) populists, uses (occasional) populist rhetoric and (sometimes) talks like a macho populist, is indeed a populist? But equally, is someone who supports (some) democratic governments, uses (occasional) democratic rhetoric and (sometimes) talks like a convinced supporter of civil society, as Putin has done, albeit increasingly seldom, a democrat? Clearly, not necessarily. Certainly, a core problem is Putin's inscrutability and ideological eclecticism. But this article has shown that the substance of Putinism subverts populism (and indeed other ideologies): to the degree that populist ideas, rhetoric and methods are used, they are always in the service of the authoritarian state. This is not even 'pseudo-populism'; rather the performance of popular support. Putin regularly demonstrates himself a 'man of the people', but only a fraction of these performative actions focus on Russia's corrupt elites.

Thus, this analysis points to both core strengths and weaknesses of Putinism. On the one hand, at least prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putin was far more ideologically and strategically flexible than calling him populist would entail. In domestic policy, he was long able to perform popular support via a range of (de facto) state-controlled initiatives and forums that vitiated any genuine populist electoral (or other) challenge to his rule. In foreign policy, he espoused a trans-ideological rhetoric with discrete populist elements (such as 'Kiev junta') while maintaining an appeal to disparate non-populist forces, even among Western elites. On the other hand, both articulating and subverting populism is a delicate (and potentially dangerous) balancing act, as shown by Putin's simultaneous invocations against foreign enemies, domestic populism, and appeals for popular unity around the 'strong state'. The tendency for this subtle balancing to be resolved over time in favour of outright repression is best shown by the career of Russia's best-known populist, Navalny, from permitted mayoral candidate (2013) to poison victim (2020) to long-term political prisoner (2021-). Since 2022, Putin has only increased his emphasis on quasi-populist anti-elitism in foreign policy even as Russia has become more repressive domestically. These two elements are arguably interconnected, lest discontent with the Russo-Ukraine war transfer towards *domestic* elites. Whether Putin can continue to keep this balance will depend on whether he can insulate Russian politics from the consequences of his disastrous invasion. In the meantime, we can expect the vituperation towards Western/Ukrainian elites only to increase.

More broadly, it matters for the study of populism how we use the term: using it more contextually, but also consistently and coherently and not relying on it as the exclusive analytical framework helps in defining the field and objects of analysis.<sup>121</sup> This study has demonstrated that a holistic, 'complexity-oriented' approach that

analyses it from multiple angles helps present populism more substantively within its distinct national context. Moreover, it shows that a methodology previously used for party manifestos in a Western democracy is still effective in examining the speeches of a non-democratic leader in a non-Western autocracy. This refutes arguments that existing concepts of populism need adaptation when applied beyond their ‘comfort zone’ of Europe and Latin America and shows that we can resist concept-stretching when they travel.<sup>122</sup> In particular, the study reinforces that we need to be careful with conflating expressions of demoticism (people-centrism) with populism. We should expect the former to be present in the politics of all politicians whose authority is vested in the people (even in aloof and increasingly repressive autocrats like Putin whose people-centrism is emphatically paternalistic). We should equally expect expressions of populism to be omnipresent in politics, but the number of politicians who regularly and more consistently use them to be considerably rarer. Putin is a lot of things, but he is not one of these.

## Notes

1. Many thanks are due to Hannah Lvovich for coding assistance; and to Matthew Blackburn for comments on an earlier version.
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